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SUBJECT: NIGERIAN LABOR DISCONTENT BECOMING CONTAGIOUS, BUT
GON ONLY PROVIDING TRIAGE

REF: A. ABUJA 1289

[1](#)B. ABUJA 1191

[1](#)C. ABUJA 1117

[1](#)D. ABUJA 821

[1](#)E. ABUJA 609

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: Frustration and discontent in the labor sector was at its most contagious state during the week of July 6-10, as the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and its affiliates led demonstrations -- and inspired others to do so -- within education, health, and media institutions across the country. All of these sectors have conveyed similar appeals to the GON to honor its commitments made more than six years ago to increase wages, pay arrears in monetized benefits, and institutional development. The latest strikes and threats of strikes follow others that have taken place across the country within the past seven months, as well as NLC labor rallies (reftels B, C, and D), with a focus on the GON's unresponsiveness and inability to honor its commitments on a variety of union demands, particularly salary levels. Combined, labor unrest appears to be increasing in strength and intensity, while the GON's response has been at best, a piecemeal triage of promises and requests for more time. As a result, discontent within Nigeria's labor sector seems to be nearing a peak, increasing the potential for nation-wide shutdowns and by extension, the threat to services in the health and education sectors and with media institutions. The Mission will monitor these strikes closely and also monitor the potential for violence. Thus far, no violence has been reported. End Summary.

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EDUCATION: Academic Unions Capitalize on NLC Momentum
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[1](#)2. (U) About a week after the NLC's last coordinated protest rally in Borno State (reftel A) in June, the ASUU embarked on its own strike, to demand better funding for education programs, adequate remuneration of staff, autonomy and democratization of university decision-making, and reinstatement of the sacked lecturers due to retirement age.

Senior Staff Association of Universities President, Adewusi Promise, told LabOff on July 10 that the demands date back to a 2001 agreement with the GON to negotiate these same issues.

The strike, which has now entered its fourth week, is not supported by all university staff across the country (ref A) but its timing--during end of semester examinations--was instrumental in eliciting the only tangible GON response in the last seven months to labor union strikes, threats of strikes, and protest rallies across the country. On July 2, the GON announced through its Minister of Education, Dr. Sam Egwu, and later Minister of Information, Dora Akunyili that the GON has agreed to ASUU's demands for academic freedom, specifically that university boards will have more non-government members than government members; approved the change in retirement age from 65 to 70 years-old; and a 40% increase in ASUU member salaries.

13. (U) ASUU continued its strike to meet its final demand for more government-funded university programs, but Egwu responded to local reporters on July 13 that "the GON has conceded enough" and that ASUU members "should consider the plight of the students and go back to the classroom because only students and their parents are being punished, not the government." (Note: Several university students in Abuja, some of whom work for Mission Nigeria, told LabOff that students, but not their parents, fully support the strike even though their exams have been delayed as a result. End Note.) ASUU issued a July 11 statement, which warned that "the strike had just begun" and appealed to Nigerians to "understand and prepare for a very long strike since it would

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not back down from its final demand for better university funding. Meanwhile, Trade Union Congress (TUC) President Peter Esele and General Secretary John Kolawole issued their own national communique on July 11, which stated that "Egwu is not capable to lead the education sector" and requested that the GON "immediately remove Egwu from office or face the wrath of labor."

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HEALTH: Medical Doctors and Administrative Staff Carry Momentum
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13. (U) Around the same time as ASUU's national strike, the Medical and Health Workers Union of Nigeria (MHWUN) warned the Ministry of Health on July 6 that it would be embarking on its own strike to protest the GON's failure to pay more than six years in arrears of monetized fringe benefits to health workers, dating back to a 2003 agreement between the GON and MHWUN. On July 9, public hospitals across the country became paralyzed, shutting down emergency wards, preventing treatment of admitted patients, and closing general practice clinics. Local press reported that people were seen wheeling their sick family members out of hospitals. MHUN General Secretary Marcus Omakuale told LabOff on July 10 that "we are very sorry for the strain and suffering of those affected by the absence of medical care, but after six years of unresponsiveness, we had no choice." Omakuale told LabOff that the GON only agreed to pay 50% of its arrears, but did not make a commitment to pay the balance. He also conveyed that "the GON's piecemeal response to Nigeria's labor problems is completely the wrong strategy and needs more of a holistic and centralized approach to working with labor."

14. (U) Less than a week after the MHWUN strike, on July 13, the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) (a confederation of Nigerian government doctors) threatened to join their health worker colleagues if the GON failed to meet their demands for better pay and improved conditions of service for government doctors. NMA National Secretary, Dr. Kenneth Okoro, announced to reporters that the NMA is giving the GON a 28-day extension to consider their demands, which according

to Okoro, have been ignored for over 11 years. In an obvious attempt to rally the public, GON Minister of Health Babatunde Osotimehin and Special Adviser to the Minister of Media Niyi Ojuolape announced through various media outlets they are "calling on all Nigerians to join their plea for the NMA not to embark on a strike that could result in unnecessary loss of life and great pain." Osotimehin also announced that an agreement would be finalized by the end of September (2009).

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MEDIA: Entertainers and Journalists Join the Choir
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15. (U) State owned radio and television stations threatened to join the Radio, Television, Theatre, and Arts Workers Union of Nigeria (RATTAWU), Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) and Amalgamated Union of Public Corporations, Civil Service Technical and Recreational Services Employees (AUPCTRE) in their one week-old strike, protesting non-payment of arrears in monetized benefits owed to its members. RATTAWU General Secretary Henry Odugala told LabOff that they have been waiting for more than five years for the GON to pay its arrears, and that union leaders like himself are under tremendous pressure "as members seem to have reached their boiling point." Odugala also informed LabOff that the GON summoned RATTAWU for meetings, where they

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promised to pay arrears in one week. On July 14, Odugala told LabOff that he called off their strike after the GON gave into their demands, but pointed out that his success "does not necessarily translate into success for the larger good of labor." He explained that "the GON's eleventh hour approach to solving labor unrest is short-sighted and in the long run not doing any of us any good."

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GON RESPONSE: An 11th Hour Take it or Leave It
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16. (U) According to all of the union leaders with whom LabOff spoke, (NLC, TUC, RATTAWU, ASUU, MHWUN), the GON has made many promises over the last several months, but minimal concessions. Back in January, NLC General Secretary John Odah told LabOff that organized labor was willing to give the Ministry of Labour and Productivity the benefit of the doubt and at least six months to reorganize itself under its then new Minister, Adetokunbo Kayode, appointed in December 2008. According to several of LabOff's Labor Ministry contacts, private individual meetings took place with the NLC and other protesting unions over the last several months to try to resolve their disputes, but it was not until the first two weeks of July, (almost six months to the day of Minister Kayode's appointment) when the ASUU strike inspired seven more unions to strike or threaten strikes, that the GON responded with proposed deliverables. Most of the GON's concessions were made in the first two weeks of July when labor unions were at their loudest and most organized across various sectors. So far, the GON through its Labor, Health, and Education ministries approved of partial payment of arrears in monetized benefits, better pay, and changes to the retirement age, with a commitment to allocate more in next year's budget.

17. (U) The GON's response appeared to satisfy RATTAWU and its sister media unions, NUJ and AUPCTRE, both of which called off their strikes. For Nigeria's public education and health unions, however, both have decided to continue their three week-old strikes with no end in sight until all of their demands, some dating back more than six years, are fully met. Using the media, GON Health and Education Ministers have expressed the most vocal of GON responses to the striking unions, heavily criticizing them for inflicting "punishment" and "death" on Nigerians. On July 17, the Industrial Arbitration Panel (IAP), which serves as the GON's tripartite

dispute settlement and conflict resolution court, ordered ASUU members back to work while assuring that "no members would be victimized or sacked by government as a result of the strike." Health Minister Osotimehin took his battle against the health worker unions to the National Assembly's House Committee on Health on July 16, requesting that they intervene, while on July 17 the Secretary of Bauchi State government was heard on VOA's Hausa Radio Service asserting that "absolutely no negotiations will take place" and then demanding that "those considering strikes immediately turn in the keys to their cars, homes, and offices."

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How Labor Strikes Affect U.S. Interests
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18. (U) The USG has a compelling interest in fostering harmony among Nigeria's tripartite dialogue partners: labor, government, and the private sector. Mission Nigeria's Mission Strategic Plan (MSP) sets forth America's partnership with Nigeria on four key strategic areas, three of which apply directly to Nigeria's labor sector: Investing in People, Economic Growth, and Governing Justly and Democratically. As the above union demands and strikes

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clearly indicate, a serious lack of transparency, good governance, and investment in the workforce, prevents a fully functioning labor sector in Nigeria. In turn, a deteriorating labor sector will impinge on the country's ability to provide for sufficient economic growth to help meet the basic needs of the population through greater employment opportunities and a stronger social safety net. Stronger economic growth through a thriving stronger labor sector, however, can result in a more transparent environment for business and provide the basis for empowering greater democratic participation. This has been clearly the case with the NLC and its union affiliates that have joined forces with a civil society coalition comprised of the Nigerian Bar Association, people with disabilities, women and youth groups, and the media, in an effort to inform citizens of their rights in general and on electoral reform specifically. They also plan to carry out civic and voter education activities in the lead up to the 2011 elections.

19. (U) Comment: As reported in refs B, C, and D, a structured and functioning tripartite dialogue is clearly lacking and sorely needed in Nigeria. The GON's ad-hoc and piecemeal approach to its labor sector and the private sector's aversion to government interference has created a fractured labor sector, the result of which has been perhaps the most pervasive labor unrest since 2007, when Nigeria's petroleum sector labor unions caused the country to nearly shut down as a result of its nation-wide strikes. As all of the unions' Secretaries General explained to LabOff over the last several months, a more holistic approach is needed in Nigeria to prevent the kind of labor unrest currently spreading across the country. This sentiment has also been echoed by ILO Director in Nigeria Sina Chuma-Mkandawire and in LabOff's recent meeting on July 9 with ILO-Geneva Director of Social Dialogue Tayo Fashoyin (septel), who said that "the current scenario of GON's uncoordinated and individual bargaining with Nigeria's labor unions is unacceptable and is in great need of an established structure of tripartite dialogue if Nigeria hopes to evolve economically."

110. (SBU) Comment continued: Besides the myriad of other problems Nigeria confronts, the inability of Nigeria's government, private sector, and workers to understand each other and find mutually sustainable solutions is yet another factor preventing the country from realizing its full potential for sustainable growth. Engaging in structured dialogue may be the first step not only to work out these differences, but in doing so, to create the basis for democratic governance and build a resilient labor market that contributes to long-term social and economic stability and

peace. Unfortunately, the current road taken by all members of Nigeria's labor sector is having the opposite effect, today affecting the education and health of its citizens, and tomorrow leading to larger social and economic development problems that Nigeria can ill afford. End Comment.

¶11. (U) This cable was coordinated with Consulate Lagos.
SANDERS